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EDWARD WESTON  
N U D E S

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EDWARD WESTON N U D E S

I first heard the name Edward Weston when I was sixteen years old and living for a brief time in Hollywood. Art collectors Walter and Lou Arensberg expressed surprise that my brother and I had never met this remarkable photographer who now lived in our own hometown, Carmel, California. He was, Walter assured us, an important American artist. Anything the Arensbergs mentioned in those days was bound to make an impression. In their home my picture eye had been conditioned by room after room of Picassos, Brancusis, Matisses, Duchamps, and many others. My mind had been fascinated and inspired by Walter's opinions—including his unshakable conviction that Francis Bacon was the true author of Shakespeare's plays. This was in 1930 or 1931, but it was four years before I managed to meet the Carmel photographer.

In the intervening period I attended Hollywood High School; managed enough after-school training at a secretarial school to get a summer job as secretary to a camp director; and lived for a while at the French Theater in San Francisco where I worked up from one-line parts ("Madame, le dîner est servi") to three- or four-liners. Meanwhile my brother had made Edward's acquaintance, and when I moved back to Carmel in 1934, it was he who introduced us.

We met at a concert in the Denny Watrous Gallery. I can't remember who was giving the concert, or what the program was, but I have no trouble at all recalling my first impression of Edward. Across the room stood a short man, very lean and erect, with a horn-rimmed pince-nez hooked to the lapel of his brown corduroy jacket. His deeply tanned face matched his clothes, and his reddish brown hair receded to expose a big dome of a forehead. His large, intense brown eyes held a playfully wicked gleam as they looked me over. For anyone interested in statistics—I wasn't—he was 48 years old and I had just turned 20. What was important to me was the sight of someone who quite evidently was twice as alive as anyone else in the room, and whose eyes most likely saw twice as much as anyone else's did. That they should look on me with obvious interest pleased me, and I tried not to look too delighted when he asked my brother to

introduce us. I remember saying that I would like to look at prints sometime but that I had to work during the week. Edward said Sunday afternoon would be just fine.

I don't know exactly what I expected to see when I walked up the steep outside staircase to Edward's second-floor studio. I had come across reproductions of his photographs, and they seemed to show a preference for subjects that were stark or dramatic—or both. But about photography as an art form I really had no opinion. The studio itself was a big barn of a room, almost empty of furnishing, so that it seemed to be all space and light. Edward's old bookcase-topped desk occupied one corner, and his bed another. A few chairs and black-painted model stands, along with a high stool that Edward used for coffee cups and ashtrays—or as a perch when showing his work—made up the rest of the furniture. A small wood stove did its best to heat the big room, sometimes supplemented by a portable kerosene heater. Edward used a tall burlap screen on rollers as a neutral background for portraits or nudes. A black and red serape covering his bed gave the room a brilliant splash of color that kept the place from looking somber.

That Sunday afternoon it was Sonya Noskowiak who showed me the prints, Edward having rushed off to Los Angeles on an assignment for the Federal Art Project. Sonya, who had by then lived with Edward for nearly five years, set the prints before me as I sat in front of an easel, under the skylight that flooded the studio with northern light. My first reaction was one of absolute incredulity.

The trees and rocks at Point Lobos—this twisted pile of kelp, that weathered barn—were the stuff of my own backyard. I had been looking at them all my life but here was evidence that I hadn't really seen them. From my exposure to the Arensberg collection, I was more accustomed to abstraction and symbolism than to realism. It took a while for me to realize that I was responding to the prints in terms of subject matter, as if Edward were merely making statements about things. I knew that wasn't the case, but I had to wait for my mind to stop gasping, "So that's what a pepper looks like!", before I could really begin to see the pictures.

The 4 x 5 nudes were a special revelation. The only photographic nudes I had previously known were the “Art Poses” to be found on well-equipped newsstands. These were romantic, very misty ladies, dewy makeup on retouched faces, depilated bodies from which all telltale suggestion of real skin had been removed, sitting or standing awkwardly in shadowy boudoir settings. I had always thought they were hilarious.

Nothing could have been farther from “Art Poses” than Edward’s nudes, and I was fascinated by their strong individuality as body portraits. At first I had the same trouble that I had with the peppers, dead birds, and eroded planks—I couldn’t get past the simple amazement at how *real* they were. Then I began to see the rhythmic patterns, the intensely perceived sculptural forms, the subtle modulations of tone, of which these small, perfect images were composed. And I began to appreciate the originality of the viewpoint that had selected just these transitory moments and made them fast against the current of time.

Sonya came to the end of a stack of prints and asked if I wanted to see more. Of course I did. I was hooked. I wanted to see all of them. Ever alert to Edward’s needs, Sonya—who had brought many an artichoke, pepper, bone or Swiss chard into the Weston studio for his camera—said he was always on the lookout for new models and maybe I’d like to give it a try. She assured me that there was no posing involved—you just moved about and did whatever you felt like. It sounded very relaxed and easy, and certainly the nudes I had seen conveyed a feeling of freedom and spontaneity. I agreed to come on the first Sunday after Edward’s return, and went home with after-images from the Weston prints haunting my eyes.

I suppose we acquire most of our feelings about our bodies too early, and in ways too complicated, to make them easy to account for. Why I should have been so lacking in modesty I don’t really know. Perhaps years of boarding school played a part—shared bathrooms and limited times for their use quickly accustom one to nudity. Perhaps it had something to do with starting life as a sickly baby (not expected to survive) and child

(constantly taken out of school because of a heart murmur). During my twelfth summer, I overthrew the restrictions that had confined me to gentle exercise, to spend my days swimming at the Carmel beach until, by summer’s end, I looked and felt like a healthy specimen. Maybe this had given me a feeling of pride of ownership in my body.

Whatever the reasons, I enjoyed being nude; it felt natural to me. I got the same kind of pleasure from being free of clothing that many people get from being well dressed. This did not mean that I was satisfied with my appearance. My mother was always trying to correct my posture because I carried one shoulder lower, and to straighten out my walk because of my tendency to toe in. She had also convinced me that my hips were much too large. This kind of nurturing had made me self-conscious about my defects, but it hadn’t arrested my tendency toward exhibitionism.

The Sunday for the sitting came. I would never in the world have admitted that this was the first time that I had posed in the nude; part of my psychological makeup



Charis Wilson 1933

in those days was the need to be always ahead of the game—to have already done everything. So when Edward pointed out the bathroom in the entrance hall where I could change into my bathrobe if I wanted, I just said, “Right here is fine,” and peeled off my clothes while we



went on talking. Once that was done, I felt perfectly comfortable, though regretful for the mutilation of a fresh appendix scar.

When you pose for a painter (I had done it, clothed), you want to be armed with plenty of things to think about so you won't just be hanging on grimly to your fixed position. From the photographs, and from what Sonya had told me, I knew it wasn't going to be that kind of posing. But I hadn't realized that I was to be such an active participant that my mind would be totally swept up in the collaboration. I had supposed there would be some suggestions—at least some dos and don'ts. There weren't. The action was entirely up to me. Edward's Graflex, a giant eye on three legs, observed all my movements and shifts of position. Its master, constantly adjusting focus and position, kept up a stream of encouraging comments to me ("Fine! . . . Can you hold that? . . . Beautiful!") while also muttering to himself about what stop to use, how long an exposure should last, and whether the light had changed since the last meter reading. This commentary was regularly punctuated by the slap-slap of film being shifted in the magazine. You were always aware of the latent energy within Edward, but in speech and movement he actually was a calm, quiet man. When he was working, however, all the vitality came fully to the surface: hands and body moved with astonishing speed and grace. Because he was short, about 5' 5", he had to stand tip-toed to get a high viewpoint. At such moments, when he would rise up to peer into the Graflex hood, he seemed to be dancing with his camera.

My first reaction to seeing the photographs was intensely personal: did I measure up? I could see right away that I did, and was reassured that I was a success as a model. I knew I really didn't look that good, and that Edward had glorified me, but it was a very pleasant thing to be glorified and I couldn't wait to go back for more. Nor could I wait to continue the extraordinary dialogue that had begun that first Sunday during rest breaks, while I sat in my bathrobe in the chilly studio and we sipped wine and discovered so many shared tastes and experiences. Luckily, the wait was not a long one.

Paradoxically, I never really did think of these nude photographs as pictures of *me*. They were photographs by *Edward*—his perceptions and his artistry. They were also only one segment of a body of work that evolved over several decades. Few people seem to realize that nudes made up the largest single category of Edward's photography for many years, and that they were a lifelong challenge to him. When I became familiar with the big bookkeeper's Journal, where he kept the index of his negatives, I soon realized that entries under the code letter *N* for nudes were far more numerous, for example, than those under *A*—architecture, *S*—shells or *P*—peppers.

The earliest nudes entered in this venerable journal were made in Edward's Glendale studio—the first five in 1918, the next two in 1920. The first nude is a misty front



Nude 1918

view of a young woman leaning against a wall, one hand resting on her shawl-wrapped hips. Her head tips forward and she peers out from arched brows, beneath wildly tousled hair, with the challenging look we associate with old movie vamps. I wonder how many admirers of his later nudes would recognize this as a Weston. In another view, the same subject leans against one side of a doorway with her back obliquely to the camera. It must be the earliest surviving example of the shadow outline

that Edward liked to get by photographing nudes with a full front light against a light background. Edward was following Japanese ideas of composition—then greatly in vogue—which juxtaposed busy areas with space and



Nude 1918

light. The 1920 front torso, page 21, seems closer to Edward's later work because the flesh emerges as vital and alive.

Were there dozens, scores, or hundreds of early nudes? Edward always ruthlessly purged work that he did not like. He had consigned several years of Daybooks to the flames because their emotional outpourings offended him, and he had scraped the emulsion from prize-winning plates to use the glass for windowpanes. *The Breast*, a print with dramatic black lines of shadow radiating from the nipple, sold not long ago at a New York auction. *The Source*, another breast, won Alfred Stieglitz's approval when Edward showed him the print in New York in 1922. More prints like these may turn up in attics and trunks—but the negatives no longer exist.

The most casual-looking of these early nudes was made in 1922 of Tina Modotti—an Italian movie actress who was to go with Edward to Mexico the following year. The shadowy lighting and wrinkled curtain give a “backstage” look, and Tina, with her ankle bracelet and

cigarette, seems to be resting between “takes.” I've always liked the picture because of that mysterious window that shows through the gauzy hanging. One series that survives from this period consists of five photographs of Edward's third son, Neil. Made in 1922, most of them are really nude portraits, since the child's body and the wistful, angelic expression of the face are indivisible.

Margrethe Mather is the subject of another series, pages 23 and 29. She had studied photography with Edward, become his business partner in the Glendale studio, and strongly influenced his aesthetic development. On the romantic plane, Edward had pursued her assiduously, but Margrethe had put him off with excuses and promises. Then, as the date drew near when Edward would depart for Mexico to join Tina, she at last relented. They went to Redondo Beach together and had what Edward described in his Daybook as “that last terrific week with her before leaving.” It was sometime during that week that Edward made his first really strong nudes. No curtain of sensibility hangs between viewer and subject and there is no idealization. These are pictures of a particular individual, with small, high breasts, distended nipples, moles on her belly, gooseflesh tightening her pores so the fine blond hairs stand out from her skin. This is not the body an “audience” sees, but the body a lover knows.

The Mexican trip helped write the final chapter of Edward's marriage to Flora Chandler. They had been married in 1910, and Flora had borne him four sons—Chandler, Brett, Neil, and Cole. Though he would later visit—and finally become a full-time father to his sons—Edward never lived with Flora after that. Their marriage became largely a matter of letters, many of them about the finances that were always straitened in Edward's household.

The new nudes of Margrethe were well received in Mexico; the artist Diego Rivera was particularly impressed by them and they accounted for six sales at Edward's first Mexican exhibition. As soon as he and Tina were settled in Mexico City, Edward went on from



where the beach nudes had left off, pages 31 and 33. He began using his 2¼ x 3¼ Graflex—although it meant enlarging the negatives for platinum printing. His successes and failures were duly reported in his diaries, the Daybooks. On November 9, 1923, he records, “. . . made nudes of Tina, work not unworthy—what shall I say?—of my lens?” On March 12 he reports on another, “It is among the best nudes I have done.” But on April 2, “. . . the last work with Tina yielded a bitter



*Tina Modotti 1 9 2 2*

disappointment for I double-exposed, destroying two of my best exposures made with the Graflex. She was lying full length, legs apart, on the azotea.”

As readers of the Weston Daybooks may have noticed, Edward was apt to wax literary or philosophical to introduce the making of a negative or negatives with which he was particularly pleased. The November 12, 1925, entry contains a mint example, beginning with a discussion of how misleading it is to say, “I am in a fine creative mood.” This is how artists are portrayed in novels, Edward continues, but it is not the fact. The artist doesn’t need “emotional heights”; he needs peace of mind. And so on. Then he describes the arrival of a model, “A,” when he is in anything but a creative mood. He stalls, drags out his shaving, complains about the light, but his new subject takes off her clothes and stands fast. Suddenly, Edward writes, there “appeared to me the most exquisite lines, forms and volumes—and I accepted—working easily, rapidly, surely.”

From this sitting came Edward’s remarkable nude backs, pages 35 and 39. He seems to have been a little troubled by them, and the next day—enthusiasm for the pictures unabated—he refuses to be answerable to any dogma, including his own. After observing that most of this series is “entirely impersonal, lacking in any human interest which might call attention to a living palpitating body,” he writes: “. . . one must satisfy all desires and at present my tendency seems entirely toward the abstract. If this is not so fine a use of my medium, it may indicate a more introspective state of being, a deeper intellectual consideration of the subject matter.”

There was an interesting postscript to this work two years later when Edward was showing prints in preparation for an exhibition at the U.C.L.A. Art Department. The person viewing the work was the director, whom Edward describes as “. . . a nice, sweet old lady with exquisite taste, of a sort. She hardly glanced at my shells, liked best the weakest ones. My nudes, the backs, I fear repelled her, though she was apologetically polite. She cannot go beyond loveliness—to beauty!”

In 1925 Edward returned from Mexico for eight months, spending part of the time in Glendale and part in a studio in San Francisco. In Southern California he made some fine nudes of his friend Miriam Lerner, pages 41 and 45. In San Francisco he did a second series of Neil, now eight years old, pages 43 and 47. In many of these photographs there is a strong feeling of movement—not of arrested or frozen motion, but of movement interrupted so briefly by the camera that its continuity is not to be questioned. Such is the feeling given by the twisting torso of Miriam and the front view of Neil where he appears almost to be dancing toward the camera.

It was two years later, while Edward was settled temporarily in his Glendale studio, that he met the ideal action subject—Bertha Wardell, pages 51 through 59. A superbly muscled dancer, Bertha had offered to pose for Edward after seeing the U.C.L.A. exhibition. For the next three months she danced before his camera, and her appreciation of his work was intense. “What you do,” she wrote to him, “awakes in me so strong a response that

I must in all joy tell you your photographs are as definite an experience to the spirit as a whiplash to the body."

Most of these classic images of Bertha strike me as miracles of form but not as particularly sensuous. I used to think that this was due to the model's glorious musculature and also to the photographer's extreme technical difficulties in recording her in action. But I now believe that it had more to do with Edward's frame of mind at the time. Bertha was powerfully drawn to Edward. But, as his Daybooks attest, he had fallen in love this time not with an individual, but with a body in motion. One lasting effect of their collaboration was that he managed to explore and surmount the technical problems of capturing this movement—an accomplishment that would bear fruit later in the 4 x 5 Graflex nudes, pages 63 through 79.

In 1929 Edward's friend Johan Hagemeyer offered to rent him his Carmel studio. Edward grabbed the chance to move out of the city—he was in San Francisco at the time—and to have a place where his sons could be with him. Most of Carmel was still rustic, with unpaved streets and houses that anywhere else would have been called cabins, scattered among tracts of manzanita and Monterey pine. A few miles south, Point Lobos lay waiting to reveal itself to the Weston camera. Sonya moved in with him and Edward taught her photography. She kept house—which could not have been easy with that shifting population of adolescent boys—and Edward hoped to settle down to a stable, undistracting family life. If it was never quite as idyllic as he hoped, the next five years were sufficiently peaceful for him to make the great photographs of rocks, seaweed, cypress, peppers, and other natural forms for which he is most widely known.

Why this tide of women?" Edward asks at one point in his Daybooks. In conversation he seemed to feel that the attraction was less to him than to his growing reputation as an artist and, to some, as a Bohemian. Recalling our days together, I think I have a better answer. During photographic sessions, Edward

made a model feel totally aware of herself. It was beyond exhibitionism or narcissism; it was more like a state of induced hypnosis, or of meditation. Curiously, he could do much the same thing without his camera. I've already mentioned how extraordinarily alive he always seemed to be. He was also the best listener I've ever met. So when he turned that vitality and receptiveness upon a woman, he made her feel more completely *there* than she probably had ever felt in her life. At least, that was my experience.

Before I met Edward, he and Sonya had already agreed that henceforth their relationship would be non-binding. But Carmel was always a gossip village, and though Edward and I practiced great discretion, it could not have been a comfortable situation for Sonya. The Depression was grinding along, and by 1934 even Carmel was feeling the pinch. I was working in the dress shop my mother had acquired when her tenant went bankrupt, but people were saving money by not buying dresses or paying their bills. Financially, Edward was not in much better shape. With the publication of the book sponsored by Merle Armitage, *Edward Weston*, his fame had increased: there was critical acclaim, and requests for major exhibitions came from all over the world. Meanwhile, his income had diminished. Sittings and print sales had fallen off until there was not enough business to justify keeping the studio. Edward decided to go to Southern California where he knew Armitage could get him on the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). When he had settled in a house in Santa Monica Canyon, he wrote to me: "Come on down. If we are going to starve, we might as well do it together."

The dress shop had finally folded by the end of 1934 and so I decided to join him—not without some misgivings. People were inclined to view the 28-year difference in our ages as an absolute obstacle to a happy union. But that was not the case. I was old for my years, having spent most of them in the company of adults, and Edward was remarkably young for his. As a lifelong devotee of health regimes, he had a youthfully lean, vigorous body. He had long since settled those vexing questions of identity, purpose and value that often harass



and incapacitate people in their middle years so that he was remarkably free and adventurous of mind. On the other hand, the household included three of his sons—one of them older than I. Misgivings were, nonetheless, laid aside, and I finished liquidating the dress shop and went to Santa Monica.

This was a kind of honeymoon period for us. After a year of the frustrations and anxieties that accompany an undercover relationship, it was a delightful luxury to be living in the same house. A short walk from the beach, the white stucco house on Mesa Road was crammed with Weston males by the time I arrived. Brett and Edward had the two bedrooms upstairs; Neil and Cole made do with mattresses and springs on the concrete floor of the garage. The rest of the downstairs was an L-shaped living-dining area, a kitchen, and a laundry porch converted to a darkroom. The best feature of the house was a large upstairs sun roof that provided a fine place for sunbathing.

After Sonya, an accomplished homemaker, I was purely ornamental. One of the boys would approach me with a pair of pants in one hand and a button in the other and ask if I could sew it on. I would reply grimly, "Maybe I can." Edward worked out an elaborate system of rotating chores, so that everyone cooked, cleaned, laundered, and tended to the other domestic tasks. The skimpy pay from the Public Works job kept us eating, mostly beans and vegetables, and when we were invited out to dinner we always accepted with alacrity—both for a change of menu and in hopes Brett or Edward might sell a print. When we "owed" lots of people for dinner, Edward made publicity pictures of the Abas String Quartet. In payment, they played a program in our living room and so we paid off all our social debts in style.

Southern California gets cold in winter, no matter what the guidebooks say. After storms, Brett would scour the beaches for driftwood for the fireplace. Unfortunately, in 1935 everyone had the same idea. When the woodbox was empty, we used old magazines and rolled-up newspapers, which were kept smoldering by means of a gas pipe Brett had installed in front of the fireplace. To my mind there are few more depressing

sights than a grate piled with damply smoking paper.

Our bedroom had light walls, a shiny floor, and a door opening on the silver-painted sundeck. With all that light bouncing around the room, Edward was naturally tempted to set up the Graflex and make some nudes. He had just ended an extremely productive two-year period with the Graflex 4 x 5's in Carmel—completing more than 50 pictures using eight different models in 1933 and even more the year that I met him. I thought the dramatic look of the light from below in the Santa Monica pictures, page 78, might start a whole new series, but the room turned out to be too small and awkward to work in and this sitting marked the end of the 4 x 5's. The next nudes, and all others, were made with his 8 x 10 camera.

Despite the economic hard times, the life in Santa Monica was full of laughter and work. There was always plenty of laughter in a Weston household; we were all drawn to what outsiders might call "vulgarity"—and Weston men tended to "goose" people rather a lot. Edward and Brett took sunbaths at every opportunity, and at first I used to join them, but I soon learned that my tolerance for such exposure was nothing like theirs.

The photograph on page 83 was made as I sat in the bedroom doorway with the room in a shadow behind me. Even then the light was almost overpoweringly bright. When I ducked my head to avoid looking into it, Edward said, "Just keep it that way." He was never happy with the shadow on the right arm, and I was never happy with the crooked hair part and the bobby pins. But when I see the picture unexpectedly, I remember most vividly Edward examining the print with a magnifying glass to decide if the few visible pubic hairs would prevent him from shipping it through the mails.

During the two years we lived in Santa Monica Canyon, we made several trips to the dunes where we stayed at Gavin Arthur's place. Gavin was a charming man, a grandson of President Arthur, and a devotee of astrology and mysticism. At Oceano he was patron saint of a shifting colony of would-be artists, writers, mystics, and passers-through. The longer-staying visitors occupied nearby cabins and managed to survive by eating



delicious bootleg clams (the ones under six inches) and also, regrettably, by bringing down an occasional wild swan with bow and arrow.

When we set off in the morning with camera, film, canteen, and snacking food and rounded the first dune, we walked into a silent, empty world. All the dunes I had seen before shrank to sandbox size when compared to these 100-foot high ridges of steep-sided bluffs and sculptured peaks. At first, I kept expecting a head to appear over the brow of a hill, but none ever did. By wandering into the high ones, we soon were surrounded by “trackless wastes.” But how to keep them trackless? Edward would often reach the top of a dune and stare around in a bewildered way. The problem was how to avoid making elephant-sized tracks by carrying the 8 x 10 camera, tripod, and film case across an area that might later be needed as a blemish-free foreground of a picture.

Altogether it was a magical place. The silence and emptiness, the beauty of the wind-sculptured forms, the absence of any living things beside ourselves—all these combined to give me an exhilarating sense of freedom. As soon as the sun warmed things up, I took off my clothes and went diving down a steep slope. When Edward photographed me, pages 85 through 93, we were on opposite sides of a small valley in the dunes, but he was considerably higher. This tended to minimize the steepness of the bank that I was on. I was reminded of the childhood game of statues as I kept returning to the top of the bank to relaunch myself, and each slide down ended in a more abandoned position. It is hard to imagine what a balancing trick it was to stay put for an exposure while sliding and rolling down the sandy embankments.

I think that the dunes were photographically liberating as well. The 8 x 10 nudes Edward had made on Mesa Road—even that very poetic figure in the doorway—were close in feeling and approach to the Graflex series. All the dune nudes were whole figures and in all of them the patterning of the surrounding landscape was an important part of the picture. The nudes to come would follow this lead—no more “bits” and “pieces,” only whole people in real places.

Edward’s job for PWAP involved copying paintings. I felt a hopeless sense of outrage that such a man should have to waste his time with such a job—making records, one after the other, of mediocre paintings. By then, I was getting deeper and deeper into Edward’s work, as record-keeper, model, equipment-toter, and sometime ghostwriter. Earlier, Edward had offered to teach me photography and was surprised when I didn’t take him up on it. I used to tell him that I had studied the fate of my predecessors—Margrethe, Tina and Sonya—and knew better than to follow in their footsteps if I didn’t want to lose him. In fact, I felt that I was temperamentally unsuited to the medium—as an operator. But in all other ways, photography had become an absorbing interest, especially Edward’s photography.

In the spring of 1937 Edward became the first photographer to win a Guggenheim Fellowship. We embarked on a heavy travel schedule, with brief stays in makeshift quarters between trips while Edward developed his negatives. There was little likelihood of nudes emerging from this fast-paced program, but it did happen once. We were in New Mexico in the last days of the year when a painter friend of Edward’s, Willard Nash, invited us to stay with him in a 150-year-old adobe near Albuquerque. I fell instantly in love with the house—a two-story, hollow square with all rooms opening on a central court. There were gunslits in the outside walls through which early residents had defended the premises. More recently, a story had gotten about that treasure was buried nearby. As a result, the adjacent land looked like the scene of trench warfare.

Willard led us through a series of absolutely bare rooms and hospitably urged us to pick any one that suited us. We made a fire in an adobe fireplace and spread our sleeping bags on the floor so that our feet would be toasted for a while. It wasn’t the warmest way to spend New Year’s Eve in New Mexico, and the next morning, while Edward was scouting for possible pictures, I settled in the courtyard for some solar heat. I stretched out on Edward’s old black cape in the warmest corner I could find. Edward discovered me soon after and

went to fetch the 8 x 10. He matched my curves and angles with those of the fireplace in the adobe wall behind me, and the four negatives he made that day were to be the only Guggenheim nudes.



*New Mexico 1937*

By spring of 1938, when Edward's Fellowship was renewed for a second year, we had traveled thousands of miles. He had hundreds of negatives to print; I had a detailed journal to edit. It was time to look for a stopping place. Then I was summoned back to Carmel to take care of my father, and we settled for the only available solution: Neil, a sufficiently versatile construction man at 21, built a one-room house for us at Carmel Highlands. The land still belonged to my father, who deeded some of it to me, but the Bank of America was busy depriving him of all his land to satisfy a note he had co-signed for his brother. Edward and I had no way of knowing whether we could hang on to our small corner.

Still, we had our stopping place, at least for a while. It was a 20' by 28' room with a darkroom and bathroom off one end and a loft above them for storage. At one end of the room was a big table for work or company meals; at the other end, a fireplace with a couch in front of it, and between them the old black model-stand on which we usually ate. A skylight in the west side of the peaked roof mingled its incoming light with what came

through the three glass-paned doors in the west wall. Through these doors we could look out over the brown rocks, blue waters, and white foam of a Pacific cove. After two years of legal skirmishing we secured our title, put up a mailbox, and gave our home its name—Wildcat Hill. We had married during the last Guggenheim trip so we now settled down as proper householders.

The first nudes that Edward made in these surroundings were of Maudelle Bass, pages 99 and 101, a young Black woman who had come to Carmel to put on a program of African dances. We all went over to my old home, where there was a setting of rock walls, shaggy lawns and borders of cypress and ferns. It was my first chance to watch the operation as a non-participant. I was interested to learn that I couldn't visualize the picture any more accurately when I was an observer than when I was a model—especially those unique exclusions and inclusions on the borders that characterized the Weston vision.

It was also at my old home that I used to keep the pool clean and take a dip most afternoons. Edward made the floating nude there, page 103, in 1939. He was never entirely happy with it, first because of the uninteresting area of surface on the pool edge above the shelf, and second because I had a distressingly dead look. The dead look is, of course, an attraction for some contemporary viewers, but it was not part of Edward's conception. Far from it.

These were busy years for us—years of close collaboration. Edward would rise in the pre-dawn hours to answer letters and to have some time to himself; I would awaken a few hours later. I had a workroom in the backyard—called "Bodie Room" after the name stamped on the diminutive castiron stove that warmed it—where my typewriter was always waiting to be exercised. For Edward, of course, it was the darkroom that demanded his attendance. Each morning we would carefully check out the weather signs, hoping that it would be "too good a day to work—a day for a picnic." More often than not the weather was foggy. And so after repeated trips to the mailbox for Edward, and a stint of gardening for me, we would settle down to work.



We did a book on our Guggenheim travels; I ghostwrote a number of articles for Edward and wrote a few under other names; we joined Ansel Adams in Yosemite where he and Edward conducted a photographic forum. Also, there was a steady stream of friends and—increasingly—admirers of Edward’s work arriving at Wildcat Hill. At night, there might be visitors unrolling sleeping bags in the front yard, and often there was wine and music and dancing—with Edward favoring Latin dances, most especially the rumba.

In 1941 the Limited Editions Club commissioned Edward to make photographs for an edition of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. We made an eight-month, cross-country trip, during which he made only one



New York 1941

nude—while we were staying for a few days in an elegant New York apartment. We were loitering along the eastern seaboard when news of Pearl Harbor sent us scurrying home.

While the war and gas rationing kept us home, Edward started a new series of nudes, pages 105 through 111. I have heard the theory that these pictures were really my ideas—a theory that would have had the photographer whooping with laughter. Edward’s pictures came out of Edward’s head and nobody else’s. By now it was an old story that whenever he started off in a new

direction, friends and admirers protested, suggesting that he might be sick, or surmised that he had fallen under someone else’s influence. In times gone by he had been upset by such reactions. Now he tended to accept them philosophically.

As second in command of the local Aircraft Warning Post at Yankee Point, I was issued a gas mask. When I came home from watch early one morning with my gruesome bit of protection, I put it on for Edward’s benefit. He said at once, “Let’s make some nudes.”

Even now I can’t tell what it is exactly that makes a gas mask such a repulsive-looking item. Something about the grey rubber, all-purpose face with its canister proboscis is nasty and chilling. Even when you try to eliminate all the associations, it seems downright impossible to find it funny. I think this aspect gave Edward more trouble than he anticipated. He kept saying it was too awful and that it was hard to make it be part of the picture and not *the* picture. Once he went out and broke off a fern to use as a counterweight; he also tried a plate of peaches. I don’t doubt that he meant the images to be shocking, but I question the view that this represented any great leap of social consciousness on Edward’s part. He greatly resented any infringements upon individual liberty, but he did not seek out messages.

The picture was called *Civilian Defense*, page 107, because that, quite literally, was the purpose for which the Army issued the mask. In other words, Edward had his reality handed to him, and all he needed to concern himself with was—in his favorite phrase—“the strongest way of seeing it.”

Edward was prowling around the house one morning in 1943 seeking a good spot for a desiccated pair of high-button shoes that Neil had sent him from the desert. When he found the right place, he was reminded of an earlier idea of doing a nude through a window-screen—a picture within a picture arrangement. He had two problems: his camera had to be set up on a bank that left him no room for maneuvering, and the tar-paper roof of the woodbox made a large patch of glare. Edward summoned me and began experimenting with props, including a platter and a bamboo rake, but he still

wasn't satisfied. Then the sun sent a shadow across the offending woodbox, and Edward removed the props and put a few nondescript blossoms diagonally on the tar-paper roof, page 105. "I'll have to call it *Spring*," he said later, and was as pleased with this picture as with any of his former nudes. If it's true that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then this photograph was to receive many outside endorsements as well.

The photographic image reveals things people thought were hidden and returns us, after the passage of years, to the passions and sorrows of other days. When I look at the nudes Edward made of me during our last year together, I am struck by the sad face of that young woman who was me. From the first, Edward and I had taken enormous pleasure in each other's company. We had started right off communicating our ideas and feelings to each other as unreservedly as if we had been old friends. At the same time we carried on a continuous spoofing raillery that served both to acknowledge and to make fun of our mutual attraction. Ten years later, we had reached a place in our shared life where constructive attitudes were giving way to destructive ones. Once the tide turned against us, we seemed powerless to stop or turn it. We could and did still work together successfully at objective tasks. But we had broken the backbone of that strong bond of love and understanding that keeps daily life from turning stale and deadly.

There was a nude taken in 1945 in which I stand on the steps of my workroom eating an apple and holding an "Edward Weston" sign as my brother looks out the window, playing his recorder. A great deal of our mutual life was commemorated in that picture: the sign was from Edward's Carmel studio; the stone bird with raised wings in one corner was carved by a stone-cutter we met on the Whitman trip; a piled-up rock wall attested to my pleasure in building such walls wherever an earth bank needed holding. Along with such specific mementos, the photograph also contained a general tapestry of Edward's and my territory at Wildcat Hill—blooming geraniums, manzanita, the weathered boards of my workroom, the grey pines on the steep hill

behind. Just then Edward was tacking titles on his pictures, and this one was called *My Little Grey Home in the West*. The mockery was evident then; now I find it has a poignant ring.

While vacationing that last year at Big Sur, we visited our friend Doug Short's place, set in a grassy clearing on a high bluff above the ocean. It was a warm January day—the kind California builds its tourist reputation upon—and Edward decided to make some nudes. He did one against a plaster wall mottled with tree shadows, page 109, and then suggested I try the swing under the oak tree. I was surprised because the low brush



1943 "My Little Grey Home in the West"

and light through the trees made the kind of spotty background he usually avoided. But the Weston eye was looking through another lens.

People who believe that a photographer is "stuck with things as they are" may imagine that this tree is on a bluff. It appears that way because Edward arranged it so, by backing off until he had nearly the whole tree against the misty light above the ocean. He had me wind up the swing a few turns and be ready to stop on command as it unwound. On the third or fourth try he got what he wanted, page 111. "Pure Maxfield Parrish," he declared when the exposure was made. "Where else could you find such a scene in mid-January? We'll have to call it *Winter Idyll*." CHARIS WILSON

## PHOTOGRAPHS

























*I have gained a new foot-hold—a new strength—a new vision. I knew when I went there something would happen to me—I was already changing—yes changed—I had lugged these pictures of mine around New York and been showered with praise—all the time knowing them to be part of my past. . . .*

*I seemed to sense just what Stieglitz would say about each print. So instead of destroying or disillusioning me, he has given more confidence and sureness and finer aesthetic understanding of my medium. . . .*

*Stieglitz has not changed me—only intensified me. Technically I was tending more and more to sharpness—any indefinite wavering line or portion distressing me greatly. . . .*

*Without wishing to minimize the praise I have bestowed on his work—I think Stieglitz overexaggerates the importance of several of his portraits—feeling quite sure that a number of mine are just as vital in their way—and I believe that I prefer in some instances my own rendering of flesh and textures over the almost too revealing and inquisitive feeling that he releases. But Stieglitz gets a depth and resulting solidity and clean outline which I may miss at times through my fear of possible wiryness. Now I have a problem to work out: to retain my own quality and rendering of values and yet achieve a more desirable depth. . . . WESTON LETTER, 1922 (To his friend Johan Hagemeyer, written on the train as he returned from New York and his crucial encounter with Alfred Stieglitz.)*































*These simplified forms I search for in the nude body are not easy to find, nor record when I do find them. There is that element of chance in the body assuming an important movement; then there is the difficulty in focusing close up with a 16" lens; and finally the possibility of movement in an exposure of from 20 seconds to 2 minutes—even the breathing will spoil a line. If I had a workroom such as the one in San Francisco with a great overhead and sidelight equal to the out-of-doors, I would use my Graflex, for there I made 1/10 second exposures with f.11—in this way I recorded Neil's body. Perhaps the next nudes I will try by using the Graflex on a tripod. . . . MARCH 24, 1927*

*Tuesdays are now definitely B. [Bertha] day. She enjoys working with me, and I respond to her. Her beauty in movement is an exquisite sight. Dancing should be always in the nude. I made 12 negatives, for the first time using the Graflex; arrested motion however, for the exposures were 3 seconds. But these negatives will be different in feeling, for the ease of manipulation of a Graflex allows more spontaneous results. APRIL 13, 1927*

*. . . printed the first of the new set of dancing nudes: . . . a kneeling figure cut at the shoulders, but kneeling does not mean it is passive—it is dancing quite as intensely as if she were on her toes! I am in love with this nude. . . . MAY 17, 1927*





























*It is but a logical step, this printing on glossy paper, in my desire for photographic beauty. Such prints retain most of the original negative quality. Subterfuge becomes impossible, every defect is exposed, all weakness equally with strength. I want the stark beauty that a lens can so exactly render, presented without interference of "artistic effect." Now all reactions on every plane must come directly from the original seeing of the thing, no secondhand emotion from exquisite paper surfaces or color: only rhythm, form and perfect detail to consider. Honesty unembellished—first conceptions coming straight through unadulterated—no suggestion, no allegiance to any other medium. MARCH 15, 1930*

*I have come to realize life as a coherent whole, and myself as a part, with rocks, trees, bones, cabbages, smokestacks, torsos, all interrelated, interdependent—each a symbol of the whole. And further, details of these parts have their own integrity, and through them the whole is indicated, so that a pebble becomes a mountain, a twig is seen as a tree. APRIL 24, 1930*

*Photography's great difficulty lies in the necessary coincidence of the sitter's revealment, the photographer's realization, the camera's readiness. But when these elements do coincide . . . when the perfect spontaneous union is consummated . . . the very bones of life are bared. MAY 1930*













































... chance enters into all branches of art: a chance word or phrase starts a trend of thought in a writer, a chance sound may bring new melody to a musician, a chance combination of lines, new composition to a painter. I take advantage of chance—which in reality is not chance—but being ready, attuned to one's surroundings—and grasp my opportunity in a way which no other medium can equal in spontaneity, while the impulse is fresh, the excitement strong. APRIL 26, 1930

I met C. [Charis] a short time before going South on the PWAP work, saw her at a concert, was immediately attracted, and asked to be introduced. I certainly had no conscious designs in mind at the time, but I am not in the habit of asking for introductions to anyone which means that the attraction was stronger than I realized. I saw this tall, beautiful girl, with finely proportioned body, intelligent face, well-freckled, blue eyes, golden brown hair to shoulders—and had to meet her. Fortunately this was easy. Her brother was already one of my good friends, which I, of course, did not know.

I left for the South before our paths crossed again. While there, a letter from S. [Sonya] said she had a new model for me, one with a beautiful body. It was C.—poor S.—How ironical. But what happened was inevitable.

The first nudes of C. were easily among the finest I had done, perhaps the finest. I was definitely interested now, and knew that she knew I was. I felt a response. But I am slow, even when I feel sure, especially if I am deeply moved.

I did not wait long before making the second series which was made on April 22, a day to always remember. I knew now what was coming; eyes don't lie and she wore no mask. Even so, I opened a bottle of wine to help build up my ego. You see I really wanted C., hence my hesitation.

And I worked with hesitation; photography had a bad second place. I made some 18 negatives, delaying always delaying, until at last she lay there below me waiting, holding my eyes with hers. And I was lost and have been ever since. A new and important chapter in my life opened on Sunday afternoon. DECEMBER 9, 1934



. . . without any instructions to the models (I never use professionals, just my friends) as to what they should do, I would say, "Move around all you wish to, the more the better." Then when something happened, I would say, "Hold it." And things did happen all the time.

Work and Play in Progress, I made some new negatives, one called "Nude and Blimp," another "Winter Idyll." Pure succotash. They will go in Museum of Modern Art Show. MARCH 3, 1945

I start with no preconceived idea—  
discovery excites me to focus—  
then rediscovery through the lens—  
final form of presentation seen on ground glass,  
the finished print provisioned complete in every  
detail of texture, movement, proportion,  
before exposure—  
the shutter's release automatically and finally  
fixes my conception, allowing no after-manipulation—  
the ultimate end, the print, is but a duplication  
of all that I saw and felt through my camera.

APRIL 24, 1930

But after all, I am not limiting myself to theories, so I never question the rightness to my approach. If I am interested, amazed, stimulated to work, that is sufficient reason to thank the Gods, and go ahead! Dare to be irrational!—keep free from formulae, open to any fresh impulse, fluid. Our time is becoming more and more bound by logic, by absolute rationalism, by the mediocrity of mass thinking, a dangerous strait jacket! From a letter to Ansel Adams, 1932













100 NUDE ON DUNES 1939



































The danger in achieving survivor status is the automatic authority it conveys. Once you are a *source*, to be quizzed and drawn out, it is remarkably easy to pass on false impressions by speaking casually or carelessly. In recent years I have felt more like an historical monument than is quite comfortable, especially when college students—to whom Edward belongs with a past as distant as Brady or Daguerre—approach me almost reverently and ask what Edward really thought or did about this or that. Answers to some of their questions can be found in Edward's published statements and Daybooks. Other answers may depend upon fuller understanding of the kind of world Edward grew up in and the social mores that influenced his work. This latter kind of background is, I believe, indispensable for a full appreciation of his nudes.

In 1886, the year Edward was born, the self-appointed guardian of American morals, Anthony Comstock, led his last spectacular vice raid—on the publication office of the New York Art Students League. That same year, the painter Thomas Eakins was forced to resign as teacher of figure painting at the Pennsylvania Academy because he had asked students to pose for a life class and had removed the loincloth from a male model. By the end of the century, the *acceptable* nude had become so rarefied and poeticized that no taint of realism remained. Maxfield Parrish achieved the ultimate in sexlessness with decorative figures—hung on parlor walls by the thousands—whose only claim to nudity was a lack of clothes.

In 1913 the New York Armory Show opened a wide window on the modern art of Europe and introduced this country to such startling innovations as cubism, abstractionism, and dadaism. The public treated much of it as a



joke, and in Chicago students at the Art Institute reacted to the show by hanging Matisse and Brancusi in effigy. Before the exhibit closed in Boston, however, nearly 300,000 people had seen the collection and a considerable number had bought examples of the work.

There were probably few artists unaffected by the Armory show—or the widespread accounts of it—which epitomized revolutionary daring and liberation from traditional constraints. It takes time, though, for innovations to be absorbed into an artist's work. Whatever new ideas blew Edward's way—he was 27 years old the year of the Armory show—did not change his early course as a rising star of the photographic salons.

According to Edward, the imitation of paintings was never a conscious aim of his. He resorted to soft focus and misty images early on, he said, because he did not know how to handle the abundant detail the photograph provided—including its record of all of the body's many imperfections. However, his earliest surviving prints use the same tonal range, from Whistler, and the same spatial design, from Japanese prints, being used by the most advanced photographers of the day. Later, he said that all through this period when he was trying to be "artistic," he had secretly admired the "sharp, clean, technically perfect photographs in the showcases of very mediocre photographers." By 1923, with his sensual and breathtakingly real nudes of Margrethe, he had broken finally with the pictorial tradition of the salons. At this point, Edward renounced all allegiance to what the naked body should be, and began to discover and record what it was.

In his Mexican Daybook Edward debated which is the finer use of photography—realism or abstraction. He ultimately resolved the question by concluding: "Enough if I work, produce, and let the moment direct my activities." The moment did direct them, from 1933 to 1935, in the making of 142 nudes with the 4 x 5 Graflex, and in this work he seems to have found a way to combine realism with abstraction. You don't doubt that these are real bodies in action, but many of them have a timeless, sculptural quality that suggests hieroglyphics of the human form.

I used to make little stamp-sized sketches of prints that were sent off to shows or that we needed to keep track of by image as well as by code number. The 4 x 5 nudes were exceptionally difficult to do. My idea of where the key lines were and where they went always came out wrong until I learned

to stop looking at the body and pay attention instead to the black and white spatial divisions along the edge of the print. For example, I would never have known, but for this exercise, what many people may see at first glance, that the whole body in the photograph on page 63 is in the left half of the picture, balanced by that long extended knee, and foot, and space.

If these nudes seldom include heads or faces it is not, as one bizarre account would have it, due to Edward's ambivalent attitude toward women or because his mother died when he was a child. Edward and I both agreed with the view of a Greek friend of ours, Jean Varda, who was fond of saying there were only three perfect shapes in the world—the hull of a boat, a violin, and a woman's body. The problem for a photographer who deals in sharp, unmanipulated images is that he cannot simplify a face, or generalize it into a type, as a painter or sculptor can. If the full face appears, the picture is inevitably the portrait of a particular individual and the expression of the face will dictate the viewer's response to the body. If a photographer wants to make a nude, rather than a nude portrait, he has only three possible options: the face must be averted, minimized by distance, or excluded.

It is also well to remember that friends who willingly served as models for Edward's nudes were not necessarily keen on being identified as subjects by family, friends, or co-workers. In some cases, such an identification could mean the loss of livelihood. Throughout Edward's most important working years—the 1920's through the 1940's—the nude retained its sinful image. Postal regulations prohibited the depiction of pubic hair in photographs shipped by mail.

On a fall day in 1934 I was in the Denny Watrous Gallery in Carmel looking at a newly hung show of Edward's work and listening to a middle-aged tourist tut-tutting as she examined a group of his 4 x 5 nudes. Unable to bear such outrage alone, she stepped to the door and called to her friend up the street: "Jane! You've got to come right away and look at these pictures. They're just terrible."

More than four decades later, there are probably few people left among patrons of museums and galleries who would be shocked by Edward's nudes. The hostile response of earlier days seems to have given way to a view that ascribes a death-orientation to much of his later work. Such comments seem to me pure balderdash. Edward spent most of his life trying to see reality, and he

was never squeamish about it. When he wanted to photograph death, he photographed death: a fallen bird, a corpse in the desert, a cemetery in New Orleans.

Actually, Edward was an exponent of serendipity long before the word and the idea were popularized. He was never so happy as when he found some perfect subject while en route to something else. A good half of the things people sent us to see during the Guggenheim travels and the Whitman trip proved to be photographically valueless to Edward. But often as not something that delighted him would turn up on the way. Edward's devotion to the accidental theory of creation was so strong that he occasionally embroidered accounts to emphasize the unplanned aspect of a picture. For example, he told Louis Stouman, who reported it in *Photonotes*, that I had been asleep when he made his first nudes of me on the dunes. With my small tolerance for direct sun, I am careful never to fall asleep in it.

When you start looking back through the wrong end of the binoculars, the hardest person to see is yourself. The other people who inhabit your past have been carried through the years in your memory album—their images sometimes simplified to the point of caricature. An entirely different treatment is given to your earlier picture of yourself. It is continually revised, as the years go by, to maintain it as a coherent part of your prevailing self-image. The artist can do much the same thing by continuously pruning and reshaping the record to recreate an *oeuvre* that satisfies his own idea of who he is and who he was. When Edward was in his mid-thirties, he ruthlessly purged much of his earlier work that reflected, he felt, too much conformity to the values of the times. He was never tolerant about his work. He used to say it made him uneasy if too many people sang his praises, that it probably meant he was just repeating himself. He felt far more comfortable in exploring new areas that were bound to raise howls of outrage—such as his final nudes did. As far as this account of our years together goes, I am sure that my own memory is as partisan as the next. My images of that long-gone time have no doubt been reshaped and edited to suit my changing needs. Most of us tend to enlarge our successes and reduce our failures—though some prefer to magnify their villainies. I have been known to lean both ways, so the most that I can claim for this recollection is to have made a determined effort to be accurate and objective. c. w.



















pp. 83-95 missing 591 EQ

